

What the Bible Says about

GRIEF



Tears in a Bottle

Death, it seems, never takes a day off. If you're reading this, you know that already. Your great loss is an excruciating reminder of the certainty of death. Still, as you walk through this season of grief, there may be some important things you've forgotten—or maybe never knew.

For instance, it's helpful to remember that, like grief, *hope* never takes a holiday. It is kept safe in God's hands, where he mixes it into your sorrow to create something you never expected.

But don't worry if that's hard to believe right now. Having hope will get easier as you begin to understand what the Bible says about grief. For example, it tells us that God identifies with the pain and sorrow of our grief. David's words in Psalm 56:8 illustrate this well:

You keep track of all my sorrows.
You have collected all my tears in your bottle.
You have recorded each one in your book.

There is a fascinating background behind this mournful prayer. In the ancient Middle East, it was customary for griever to weep into containers made of animal skin—literally catching their tears in the “bottles” of their day. They would then place those precious containers outside the tombs of their loved ones as both symbols and promises of their undying love.

Applying this to David's prayer means that God not only understands our sorrow but also *treasures* it by collecting our tears in his bottle, so to speak. Maybe he does this because he, too, knows what it's like to grieve.

God Is a Griever

Although it's easy to overlook this truth during times of heartbreak, the Bible teaches that in all three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—God is a griever.



God the Father Grieves

The first time grief is mentioned in the Bible happens right before the account of Noah and the flood, when God the Father “saw that the wickedness of mankind was great.... And He was *grieved* in His heart” (Gen. 6:5–6 NASB). Much later, he rescued his people, Israel, from slavery in Egypt, but on the way to the promised land, “they rebelled against him in the wilderness and *grieved* his heart in that dry wasteland” (Ps. 78:40). When his people repeatedly rebelled after they were established in the land, God expressed his grief through his prophets on many occasions.



God the Son Grieves

Fast-forward to the New Testament, and we also find Jesus grieving for God's people: “As he came closer to Jerusalem ... he began to weep. ‘How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace’” (Luke 19:41–42). On the night before his crucifixion, knowing the painful trauma that was to come, Jesus told his closest friends, “My soul is crushed with *grief* to the point of death” (Matt. 26:38). This was a moment that had been foretold more than seven hundred years earlier when the prophet Isaiah wrote that “[Jesus] was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest *grief*. He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins” (Isa. 53:3, 5).



God the Holy Spirit Grieves

After Jesus was crucified and buried, God resurrected him to life! He spent forty days on earth before ascending to his Father in heaven. Right before that, Jesus told his disciples, “In just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). In fact, all who believe in Jesus up to this present day receive the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul gives this wise advice: “Do not *grieve* the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30 NASB). Paul is saying that when believers live contrary to God's perfect law of love, the Holy Spirit, who dwells within them, experiences grief.

“Jesus Wept” ... but Why?

God could have simply let us suffer alone in our grief, but instead he chose to experience it with us. With God’s help, we can grieve like he does: with hope, power, and deep love. The Bible does not promise that we will escape the pains of death and grief, but it does promise that *God will share our grief and sustain us in our sorrow*, because he alone truly understands what we’re going through.

The story of Lazarus in John 11:1–44 illustrates this well. It records another moment in the Bible when God grieved, with verse 35 simply saying, “Then Jesus wept.” This happened only moments before Jesus would perform an astonishing miracle by raising his friend Lazarus from death to life. Several days earlier, Lazarus’s sisters, Mary and Martha, had sent Jesus an urgent



message: “Your dear friend is very sick.” Mary and Martha knew their brother was at death’s door, but they also knew that Jesus could heal him. They waited anxiously, but Jesus deliberately stayed away—because he had a plan.

After Lazarus died, the heartbroken sisters buried their brother in a cave. Finally, four days after Lazarus’s death, Jesus arrived. Martha met him first and said, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have

died.” Jesus told Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” When Mary came to Jesus, “she fell at his feet,” weeping. Angered and troubled, Jesus asked where Lazarus was buried. “Lord, come and see,” they answered. And then it happened: “Jesus wept.” But why would Jesus cry at this moment, when he knew that he would soon work a fantastic miracle and raise Lazarus? Why did he not just say, “Stop crying, Mary, and watch what I’m about to do!”?

John 11:33 seems to give the only reason for his tears: “Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her.” *It appears that Jesus was unwilling to let Mary and her friends grieve alone.* And Jesus does the same for us today. He may not swoop in and rescue us from physical death or grief, but he refuses to let us suffer those pains *alone*. Jesus promised, “Be sure of this: I am *with you always*, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Through his Holy Spirit, Jesus immerses himself in every sorrow we feel, and he weeps with us. You were never meant to grieve alone, dear friend. And *that’s* why Jesus wept.

Our Lifeguard Through the Storm

The story is told of a man who was surfing a wave, far from shore. Suddenly, without warning, he was overtaken by a furious storm. Caught in the deluge, he swam for his life as his surfboard drifted away. Suddenly, in a flash of lightning, the man saw a lifeguard in the water.

“What are you doing here?” the man shouted. “If you had been here a few minutes ago, I might not be drowning! You could have done something!”

“Let me help you,” the lifeguard said, swimming steadily beside him, life ring in hand. “Together we can weather this storm.”

“No!” the man shouted. “You should’ve been here sooner! You’re the reason I’m drowning now!” He swung a wet fist toward the lifeguard.

“Let me help you,” the lifeguard repeated. “I’ll make sure you survive this storm.”

“Get away from me,” the man gurgled through a mouthful of seawater. “I’m so angry at you that I would rather drown!”



We who grieve are often like that man, lost and struggling in deep water, angry and afraid. But God has not left us to drown; he comes to us as our Lifeguard:

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed. —PSALM 34:18

Our Lifeguard won’t take us out of the storm, but he will hold us up and help us breathe while the winds and waves keep pounding:

Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.

—ISAIAH 41:10

Our Lifeguard wants to make sure we survive our furious sorrow, and we need to accept the help he offers and allow him to hold us tight:

My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever. —PSALM 73:26

